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Tobias Warner, *The Tongue-Tied Imagination: Decolonizing Literary Modernity in Senegal*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. ix + 342 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780823284634; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780823284290; \$27.99 U.S.(eb). ISBN 9780823284306.

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Tobias Warner's *The Tongue-Tied Imagination: Decolonizing Literary Modernity in Senegal* is a thorough, detailed look at both well-known and lesser-known bodies of literature from the mid- and late twentieth century in Senegal. This is a meticulously well-researched book that skillfully applies multiple methods to examine with fresh eyes the tension between colonial/European languages and African vernacular in cultural production. Warner asks us to reconsider French and francophone studies' firm dividing lines between, in the case of *The Tongue-Tied Imagination*, French and Wolof, and to ask how creators working in these two languages have, precisely because of negotiations of meaning between the two languages, produced a particular body of creative work. Warner's proposed new methods for comparative criticism focused on post-independence Senegal have far-reaching implications in French studies, and in comparative literature and African literary studies more broadly.

Warner opens the book by staging a particular instance of the so-called language question at the first conference on African literatures in French in Dakar in 1963, and introduces one of the main figures in this book, novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène. In this circle of francophone writers and intellectuals convening just after independence, Sembène questions the very foundation of holding a conference on African literature "of French expression." Fellow writer Birago Diop challenges Sembène to "say it in Wolof" and then suggests that if he is so adamantly opposed to using French for literary expression, can Sembène not articulate in Wolof these same arguments first given in French (p. 2)? Diop's point is borne out by Sembène's admission that he cannot repeat his argument exactly in Wolof. A first glance takeaway here might be that there is a reason the colonial language was valued for creative and not just administrative expression. But Sembène's point that a theoretical book published in Wolof would reach a much smaller reading public than one in French--his turning to the question of audience--is crucial for the study that follows.

From this context of the 1963 Dakar conference, Warner invites the reader to consider how vital the decisions regarding literary production and language felt for stakeholders in literary circles on the continent in the early days of independence. While today, as Warner points out, the debate over producing literature in the vernacular tends to decline into accusations of nativism, Warner

here invites the reader to resituate these debates in the era of independence with an aim not to revive the question, but to investigate *how* it became so significant and what a historiography of this debate in Senegal can tell us about the nature of literature in Africa, and world literature more broadly. As a scholar with a formation in French and francophone studies, and an awareness of the risk of the dead angles that come with that language-focused approach to the study of African literatures, I am excited by this work that puts colonial and vernacular texts (broadly considered) in conversation with each other. The author goes beyond a comparative study of them, and shows how these primary texts existed simultaneously in the moment and for these creators as well. Warner's background is in comparative literature, and his theoretical and practical training in analyzing the stakes of translation, and the widely diverse forms that it can take, is a welcome approach to renew the study of this period and place within francophone studies.

Senegalese literature continues to hold a privileged place in Euro-American university-level teaching of and research on francophone literatures, and figures such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Ousmane Sembène, and Mariama Bâ remain hyper-visible on university syllabi. This can result in a very monolingual view of the country in general and the literature produced there specifically.[1] Warner's study, while revisiting these three figures (among others) in detail, reframes the relationship between French and Wolof as working simultaneously, thus affording a more expansive interpretation both of Senegalese authors' works and of oversimplified ideas that set tradition against modernity. Working in both languages together allows Warner to show that "the emergence of Senegal's highly visible francophone literary tradition has been haunted from the very start by the issue of language" (p. 5). This haunting is not read as a rivalry nor as two separate traditions on parallel tracks: "the politics of language in Senegal have produced not a separation of Wolof and French but rather a spectrum of cross-linguistic creative practices" (p. 6).

Warner has several aims in this volume that reach beyond the specificities of francophone studies, African literatures, or Senegalese literary history, calling for more "expansive" and renewed approaches to both translation and literary comparison (p. 6). The stakes of these renewed approaches are clear in Warner's response to the question from Dakar 1963: What is African literature? Warner's study asks us to consider less what is African or not about a given body of work but rather what possibilities open up when we consider the "what is literature" part of that question. He deploys several different methodologies to examine the primary texts in each chapter, studying each through linguistic, historical, materialist, and formalist lenses. These mixed methods afford a rich examination of a given instance of translation and interpretation from several different angles. Again, Warner's aim is not to relitigate the language question of the independences era but rather to explain to us how we got here and what it tells us about literary-ness; these four angles in each of his analytical chapters offer to the reader a four-dimensional view of what the language debates consisted of and their significance, showing what effects these debates have had on literary studies today.

The main body of the book is divided into three sections of several chapters each. The first section, titled "Colonial Literary Modernity," revisits some classic authors and some new ones, who are read next to the canonical figure of Léopold Sédar Senghor in a new way. Much has been written about l'abbé Boilat, considering him the first French-language writer from Senegal.[2] Warner spends time on Boilat's *Grammaire*, noting its significance in the twentieth century in its presence in Senghor's *Anthologie*. Boilat's "collections" of texts of all types exemplify the

importance of translation, as Warner understands it, in a broad, expansive sense: Boilat translates not just language to language, but also different forms of communication, such as oral call and response forms, copying them down and rendering them literary. The second chapter studies at length the student notebooks from the Ponty School, capstone-type projects completed by students of the elite Dakar school in the 1930s. Pupils completed essentially ethnographic research in their home communities while also demonstrating their own self-awareness and development into the modern educated world for which the school was preparing them. Warner calls these an example of “para-literary authorship” which he defines as “narrative modes that are defined by being beside and beyond the literary, but that are nevertheless immanently entangled with it” (p. 53). Warner presents evidence for the influence of this type of writing in French West Africa, beyond school assignments and colonial administration, in the moment of the explosion of the colonial novel. Again, Warner establishes a bridge between his new readings of lesser-studied texts (the Ponty notebooks) and classics with which francophone scholars are very familiar, finding evidence for this kind of authorship in Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir*. Periodicals are also a primary source in this first section, specifically Ousmane Socé’s serialization of *Karim*. Parts of these texts appear in Senghor’s *Anthologie* nearly simultaneously, demonstrating that it is inaccurate to assume a clear separation between writers working in the two languages or in multiple forms and genres (serialized periodicals vs. bound printed books), an artificial separation scholars sometimes impose that impoverishes interpretation of the literature.

The second part, “Decolonization and the Language Question,” focuses on the decades immediately following independence, and writers/creators Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Sembène. Warner spends a significant amount of time developing at more length his theoretical approach to poetics, specifically counterpoetics, which he borrows from Edouard Glissant.<sup>[3]</sup> Warner uses the term counterpoetics to refer to “a multilingual and self-referential poetics of linguistic constraint” (p. 154). The restraint on expression here becomes an opportunity for creative production, specifically the multilingual demands of different audiences in this case. Warner points out that Senghor and Diop both spent time theorizing African languages, and although we have a tendency to remember Senghor as the “consummate francophile” (p. 141) the *poète-président* also spent time developing a theory of African language literature. The two thinkers and political rivals take divergent paths, however. Whereas Senghor famously proposed the idea that European languages were better at expressing technical ideas, and African languages more appropriate for sign and sensation, Diop embraced the invention of new words and portmanteaus to modernize Wolof, creating a new dictionary of sorts that could be a model for modernizing other African languages. Importantly for Warner, however, both theorists relied on translation to accomplish their aims.

Warner’s re-reading of Sembène’s classic filmed versions of *Le Mandat* (*The Money Order*) and *La Noire de...* (*Black Girl*) (1968) in this section is of particular interest for revisiting and nuancing the prevailing notion of Sembène’s progression from using French toward using Wolof in his writing and film career. As part of the conditions for funding for *Le Mandat*, Sembène was required to produce two versions, one in Wolof and one in French, which were produced simultaneously (the scenes were re-shot in both languages; it is not dubbed). The French version was never publicly circulated. *La Noire de...* also raises some of these language issues: filmed “silently,” the later postproduction in Paris added Diouana’s internal monologue as a voice-over by Haitian actress and singer Toto Bissainthe (p. 157). Sembène’s famous cameos in his films are also, in Warner’s reading, indicative of a particular kind of engagement with language, making him less an *auteur* of cinema and more of an *écrivain public*. “Sembène playing the *écrivain public*

draws awareness to the mediation of his films through a regime of enforced translation, from dubbing to simultaneous performance. By taking on this role in his own films, Sembène suggests that what he is engaged in is not *auteur* cinema, but *écrivain public* cinema, which would heighten awareness of the director's role as a mediator" (p. 163). Sembène himself says that he was not trying to draw attention to himself in his film in these roles: "He is refusing to take authorship of the very gesture that could be interpreted as the work of a self-conscious *auteur*, rather than that of an *écrivain public* director at the mercy of contingency" (p. 164).

A substantial part of these theories and policy implementations with regards to languages is, explicitly or not, looking toward some future point in time when conditions will be different: when there will be a robust literary infrastructure in the vernacular, when there will be a reading public for Wolof, etc. The book's third section, "World Literature, Neoliberalism," examines the stakes of these future-oriented projects, focusing on Mariama Bâ (the only woman writer included in this study's primary materials) and Boubacar Boris Diop. Their works are analyzed within the framework of policy reforms in postcolonial Senegal: first, the family law reforms of the 1970s and later, the neoliberal restructuring of the Senegalese economy in the 1980s and 1990s. These new economic policies, in particular, had dramatic effects on the cultural sphere. In the case of Bâ's foundational novel, *Une si longue lettre*, its translation and subsequent circulation in Euro-American universities made polygamy as an institution and the critique of it a, if not the, central focus of analyses of the novel. In returning to the text itself, Warner reminds readers that Bâ never once includes the word polygamy in her novel and the "interior, individual space[s]" of narrator Ramatoulaye's reflections are really the focus (p. 193). Warner invites us to move past the tradition vs. modernity dichotomy that common criticism of the novel has imposed, to more complex and perhaps more compelling questions: What would the "criteria of value" (as opposed to sex or gender) that Bâ's narrator wishes for look like (p. 193)? Who is Ramatoulaye's audience? Especially when considering the recent translation into Wolof by Maam Yunus Dieng, this audience is—still—a public yet to come. In the case of Boubacar Boris Diop's novel written in Wolof, *Doomi Golo*, this future public is also a specter that haunts the text. The novel exists in several translations, and interestingly the English version was translated not from the Wolof but from the French—despite the blurb on the book's cover and other promotional materials from the publisher declaring it "the first novel to be translated from Wolof to English."<sup>[4]</sup> We see again in this example Warner's observation that the dividing lines we imagine between writers and literary objects in one or another language in Senegal are in fact quite blurry. What is more, it is important that we overcome our tendency to imagine this separation between "vernacular fiction and its uncertain public" and instead acknowledge and study the fact that it is actually a case of "mutual invention" (p. 232).

Warner concludes his study with an epilogue that meditates on Aimé Césaire's play on the political career and last days of Patrice Lumumba, *Une Saison au Congo*, recently translated into Wolof by Boubacar Boris Diop. Warner offers this as an example of the "new comparative method" that he has argued for throughout the monograph, comparing "a separation between audience and address" that exists in different versions and "circumstances" of the text (p. 234). A thorny temporality is again at play, not only with the translation but also, Warner argues, with the original text by Césaire, considering its many versions and rewrites standing on their own. Even internally in the world of the play, Lumumba is always short on time for his plans, or worries that his efforts are taking too long. The reader of course knows that Lumumba will ultimately run out of time. Read in this way, the heart of the text, says Warner, is clearly a refusal

on the part of Césaire—and of Diop, by extension, in the translation—to let decolonization become history in the sense of a thing in the past that is no longer currently happening.

Césaire’s play and Diop’s translation challenge us to refuse to accept decolonization as something that already happened. The language question, too, is not (simply) a relic of the era of independence. Rather, the standardization of world literature, in language and in the form of what is considered literary, is not a foregone conclusion. “Césaire’s refusal to accept the passing of decolonization into history finds its echo in the challenge the language question continues to pose in world literature,” that challenge being that “Other futures... [are] possible” (p. 241).

This book opens up new paths of inquiry about examples of literature that are not often considered in a “Global English” understanding of world literature (p. 232). Some of the most compelling aspects of Warner’s intervention are precisely his reworking of theories of translation and world literature, and the potential for broad applications of that reworking in literary studies. Warner reminds the reader that the way vernacular works are produced and circulate in Africa does not necessarily conform to Benedict Anderson’s theory about the alignment of the rise in print cultures and nationalism.<sup>[5]</sup> Warner also refutes arguments that are foundational in the academic study of world literature and the defining of the field; scholars such as Casanova, Damrosch, and Moretti make generalizations that do not apply to Africa.<sup>[6]</sup> In *The Tongue-tied Imagination*, Warner offers possibilities for theorizing world literature in a more meaningful way that is less exclusively Euro-American, or at the very least in a way that better incorporates West Africa. Warner’s proficiency in Wolof, which is sadly rare in francophone studies among Euro-American scholars, allows him to bring a different and much-needed perspective on this body of work compared to others working in francophone studies. *The Tongue-Tied Imagination* will be of interest to scholars of comparative literature as well as specialists in francophone studies and African studies.

## NOTES

[1] Lily Saint and Bhakti Sringapore have produced a preliminary study of African literatures taught in Euro-American universities, noting the dominance of English- and French-language texts assigned, with very few texts coming from vernacular languages. Bâ’s novel is the only one originally published in French in the top 20 texts mentioned by faculty in their survey. Lily Saint, and Bhakti Shringapore, “African Literature Is a Country,” *Africa Is a Country*, Aug. 2020, <https://africasacountry.com/2020/08/african-literature-is-a-country> (last accessed September 29 2021).

[2] See David Murphy, “Birth of a Nation? The Origins of Senegalese Literature in French.” *Research in African Literatures* 39, no. 1 (2008): 48-69 and Bernard Mouralis, *L’Illusion de l’altérité: Études de littérature africaine* (Paris: Champion, 2007).

[3] Edouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

[4] Boubacar Boris Diop, *Doomi Golo: The Hidden Notebooks*, trans. Vera Wülfing-Leckie and El Hadji Moustapha Diop (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016).

[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

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[6] Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des Lettres* (Paris: Points, 2008); David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).

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